

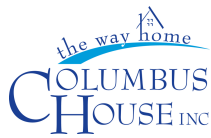
**Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services Health Sub-Committee
Thursday, March 9th**

**General Comment on H.B. No. 6659: An Act Concerning the State Budget for The
Biennium Ending June 30, 2025, and Making Appropriations Therefor**

Hello, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Vice Chairs Hartley, Exum, and Paris, and Ranking Members Berthel and Nuccio, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Lisa Polizzo and I am Communications Specialist at Columbus House and a resident of Milford. I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony and general comment on H.B. No. 6659: An Act Concerning the State Budget for The Biennium Ending June 30, 2025, and Making Appropriations Therefor.

Here are just a few anecdotes that I feel illustrate the incredible, lifesaving work performed by frontline staff at Columbus House:

- I witnessed our lowest paid staff literally save a man's life. He had overdosed and was sitting outside our New Haven Shelter. I was terrified and in tears watching from my second-floor office while they worked swiftly, administering Narcan with care and compassion – like a high functioning emergency room team.
- I met a female Residential Supervisor working third shift and learned that it was one of THREE jobs that she worked to support her children.
- I spoke to a minimum-wage seasonal employee at one of the warming centers operated by Columbus House. He found a client had overdosed in the bathroom one night. The client was rushed to the ER, recovered, and then returned to the warming center! The client then tried, again, to use drugs in the bathroom. The employee managed the situation, ultimately upsetting the client. The client keyed the car of the employee in retaliation. YET, the employee continued to show up for his job. He didn't blame the client; he blamed the addiction. (That is a lot of compassion for \$14/hr.!)
- I recently interviewed a woman living at Whalley Terrace – a supportive housing site for seniors. Severely abused as a child and as an adult, her Whalley Terrace apartment is the only stable home she has ever lived in. She says she “loves” her Case Manager who helps her fill out paperwork, create goals, save money for things like a car, get into senior workforce classes, is a listening ear when she is feeling down, and is available for just about anything she might need to keep her safe and housed. However, she is worried that her Case Manager, whom she has developed a strong relationship with, will leave soon, “just like the others.” Case Managers love their work and the people they help, but they don't make enough money to support

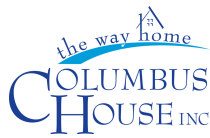


themselves. How can they support our most vulnerable neighbors when they don't make a living wage?

These are just four anecdotes from over ten-years as a Communications Specialist in the Development Department at Columbus House, a homeless service provider based in New Haven with operations in Middlesex, Hartford, and New London counties. I could write a book on the inspiring stories I've witnessed. I could also NEVER do the work our frontline staff does, and certainly not for the pay they receive.

Anecdotes aside, the numbers speak for themselves. Connecticut was experiencing a yearly statewide decline in homelessness for years before the pandemic struck in 2020. With emergency COVID funding, Columbus House and our partners across the state proved what we knew all along: Housing IS Healthcare. All of Columbus House clients stayed safe in hotels while an unprecedented number of people moved into their own apartments. Now, the emergency funding is gone, the eviction moratoriums have ended, we have a severe affordable housing shortage, and we are witnessing what we predicted: a drastic increase – around 40% – in homelessness across the state compared to pre-pandemic. This is unforgivable in a state as rich as ours.

- **Connecticut's homeless response system is overburdened, historically underfunded**, and confronting a workforce shortage that threatens the statewide safety net we provide.
- **The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic remain acute for the homeless response system.** Our data shows that homelessness has grown significantly since the beginning of the pandemic, with a 39% increase in homelessness since 2020, and a 56% increase in calls to 2-1-1 in 2022 alone. Since 2019, our system has witnessed a 30% increase in unsheltered households and 82% increase in CAN appointments for those at imminent risk of homelessness.
- **As inflation has risen rapidly, so have the operations costs for our system.** Like any public service, homeless services providers must pay the costs of health insurance, rent, utilities, and other goods and services, often at the expense of adequate wages. Unlike most public services, homeless service providers are barely funded by the state.
- **Connecticut's homeless response system is confronting a workforce shortage that threatens the statewide safety net we provide.** Staff who have dedicated their careers to helping people experiencing homelessness are finding themselves in need of the same services they provide and being pushed into homelessness themselves. We need the legislature to help our providers ensure adequate wages, with a focus on transforming jobs in the sector into careers of choice.



We need this Committee's help to Rescue the Homeless Response System. Of the total \$50,000,000 to Rescue the Homeless Response System, we are asking this committee to commit to a **\$7,713,799 one-time increase in DMHAS Housing/Supports Services line** to address chronic underfunding of homeless response nonprofits and to ensure adequate wages for front-line homeless response workers.

There remains no dedicated annual funding for the parts of our system that our communities rely on year after year. Therefore, we also request your support for the following annual amounts:

- **\$5.95 million annually** in the DOH Housing/Homeless Services line for Coordinated Access Network infrastructure, to ensure that the indispensable emergency services we provide are available to all.
- **\$5 million annually** in the DOH Housing/Homeless Services line for the annual Cold Weather Emergency Response Program.
- **\$2 million annually** in the DOH Housing/Homeless Services line for a Flexible Funding Subsidy Pool to subsidize housing and provide flexible assistance, which have been shown to lower costs to the health care system and lead to improved individual health outcomes.

Thank you to the committee for this opportunity to testify. It is with your support that we can rescue the homeless response system and help make sure Connecticut's residents are healthy and stably housed.

Sincerely,

Lisa Polizzo
Communications Specialist
Columbus House